



News From

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GAO: INS Application Process Still Plagued By Long Delays

**More Than 4,500 Naturalization Cases Waiting For Approval At
Chicago Field Office Since July 1998**

Washington, DC – The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) has failed to clear a massive application backlog, despite significant increases in funding and staffing, according to a General Accounting Office (GAO) report compiled at the request of U.S. Representative Judy Biggert (R-IL13).

At the Chicago INS Field Office, more than 4,500 naturalization applications have been waiting for approval since July 1998. And in September 2000, the GAO found that the Field Office was just starting to process 24-month old applications for adjustment of status and 27-month old applications for certification of citizenship.

Nationally, more than 585,000 applicants have been waiting at least 21 months for their naturalization and adjustment of status applications to be decided as of October 2000.

“Just as we would not tolerate a three-year wait for Social Security checks or for the payment of Medicare claims, we cannot accept a three-year wait for a citizenship application to be processed,” said Biggert, who requested the GAO study at a congressional field hearing focusing on the INS Chicago Field Office in September 1999. “We have known for quite some time that the INS, and to a lesser extent, the Chicago Field Office suffers from poor management and has low credibility with the people it is supposed to serve. But to show little – if any – improvement is not acceptable.

The GAO study revealed that:

- information on actual processing times is not available because the agency’s automated application data are incomplete and unreliable;
- due to long turn-around times, the INS is in many instances granting work authorization to aliens before it fully adjudicates their adjustment of status cases, resulting in about 80,000 revocations of that work authorization – or 14 percent of all cases – in 2000 alone;

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- despite the doubling of program staff since fiscal year 1995, officials at the INS told the GAO that additional staff is needed to stay current with the application workload; however, the INS did not know how much staff was needed, where the staff should be located, or what types of skills the staff should have;
- long processing times have produced additional work for INS staff and applicants because both have to spend additional time renewing and reviewing employment authorization forms or reapplying for and approving travel authorization; and,
- long wait times have reportedly negatively impacted applicants' lives, prompting lawsuits and taking resources away from form processing.

“The problems outlined in the GAO report started in the previous Administration, but will soon be the Bush Administration’s problems if corrective measures are not taken soon,” said Biggert. “Unfortunately, the Bush Administration has a difficult task to undertake. GAO has concluded that the INS’ most significant problem – lack of automation – will take years to resolve.”

“With an estimated five to eight percent of the foreign-born population residing in our State, we clearly owe it to the people of Illinois to undertake reforms that strengthen this important Agency.”

Biggert has sent a letter to James W. Ziglar, the INS Commissioner-designate, requesting a meeting upon his confirmation to discuss what actions Congress can take to help him address and improve the situation at the INS.

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